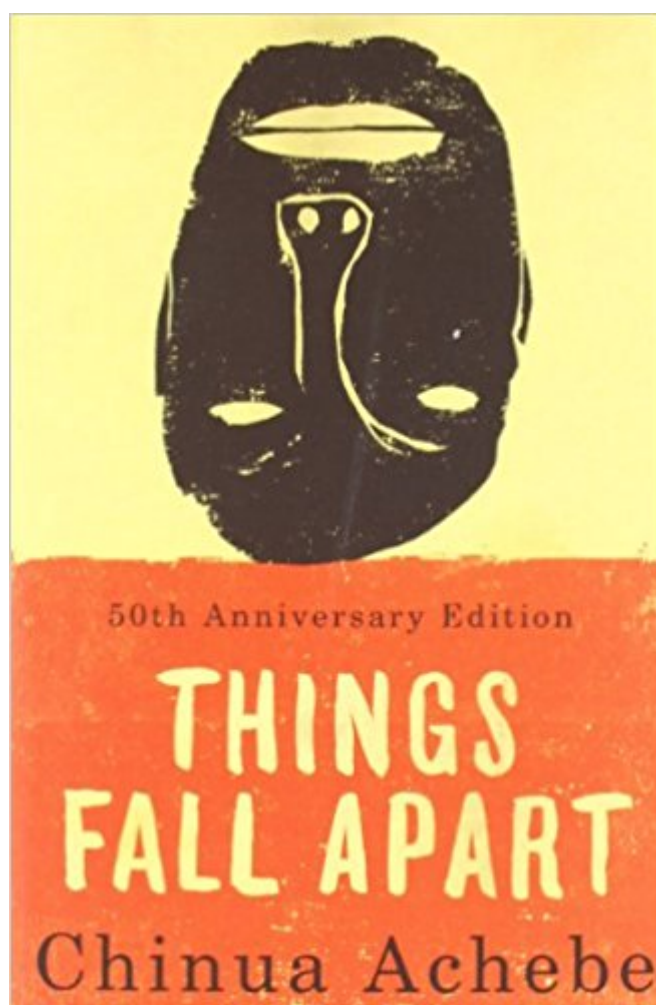


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Things Fall Apart



Synopsis

Things Fall Apart tells two intertwining stories, both centering on Okonkwo, a strong man of an Ibo village in Nigeria. The first, a powerful fable of the immemorial conflict between the individual and society, traces Okonkwo's fall from grace with the tribal world. The second, as modern as the first is ancient, concerns the clash of cultures and the destruction of Okonkwo's world with the arrival of aggressive European missionaries. These perfectly harmonized twin dramas are informed by an awareness capable of encompassing at once the life of nature, human history, and the mysterious compulsions of the soul.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The first time I read this book, I hated it. Just flat hated it. That was my junior year of high school. Flash forward a few years to college, and it's on the reading list again. "Why, oh why?" I moan. Then I read the thing. And you know what I discover? It's a masterpiece. Chinua Achebe describes "Things Fall Apart" as a response to Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness", which is, comparatively, a denser, perhaps less accessible read. The parallels are there: the ominous drumbeats Marlow describes as mingling with his heartbeat are here given a source and a context. We, as readers, are invited into the lives of the Ibo clan in Nigeria. We learn their customs, their beliefs, terms from their language. Okonkwo, the main character, is the perfect anti-hero. He is maybe Achebe's ultimate creation: flawed, angry, deeply afraid but outwardly fierce. To have given us a perfect hero would have been to sell the story of these people drastically short. Achebe's great achievement is in rendering them as humans, people we can identify with. So they don't dress like Americans, or

share our religious beliefs. Who's to say which method is correct, or if there has to be a correct and incorrect way. Achebe provokes thoughtfulness and important questions. His narrative is easy to read structurally, but the story itself is painful and frustrating. It is worthy of its subject. "Things Fall Apart" provoked some of the best classroom discussions I've ever experienced. As a reader, it has enriched my life. My thanks to Achebe for his marvelous contribution to literature. This book has a permanent place on my shelves.

The first two-thirds of "Things Fall Apart" is an affectionate description of the culture of an Ibo clan told from an insider's viewpoint, focusing on the life of Okonkwo, one of his tribe's most respected leaders. The customs and religion of the Ibo village are described with sympathy and simplicity, creating a sense of nostalgia for a way of life completely exotic to Western sensibilities, but making the reader feel the force and logic of a traditional culture seen from within. This idyllic description is clouded by the reader's awareness of the culture's fragility, a foreboding sense of pity and of looming disaster. Disaster comes, of course, in the shape of white missionaries. In the last part of the story, evangelizing Christians and English colonial administrators establish themselves in the Ibo village, and act to corrode and unravel the traditional life of the Ibo people. An escalating series of misunderstandings and conflicts between the whites and natives lead to the inevitable tragic ending. In the last paragraph of the novel, the perspective shifts suddenly to that of the English colonial administrator, and ends with one of the most powerful and affecting last lines of any novel I've read. This book was thoroughly enjoyable, and I recommend it unreservedly.

The more the reader thinks about Things Fall Apart, the more he becomes aware that the heart of a story is about the struggles of an individual and less about what is a compelling and unsentimental survey of Nigeria's Ibo culture just before the arrival of white settlers. The story's protagonist is Okonkwo, who at first appears to be a model warrior and self-made man who slowly discovers that the attributes he believed would serve him well as an adult instead breed a fear of failure and profound frustration. He is a complex and heavy-handed head of his household who is at once sympathetic and cruel. Most of the story is told before the actual appearance of the first white settlers, but their pending arrival hangs over the middle part of the book like a rain cloud. By the time it actually happens in the last 50 or so pages of the book, Okonkwo has been driven into exile, his life a shambles. He has only a slim hope of redemption, and that is shattered by the arrival of the settlers. Okonkwo's story is a relevant one even at a time when cultural and political imperialism has turned away from Africa toward the Middle East, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. But more

important than its relevance is its artistry: it is a deceptively simple epic tale somehow packed into just over 200 pages, and one of the most impressive first novels on record. Don't miss it.

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